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Painful Luxuries - The Amenities Arms Race.

By Robert Kravitz

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Some of us are old enough to remember the arms race that started in the 1950s and ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was a massive and expensive militarization movement on the parts of both the former Soviet Union and the United States. The goal was a rush to build what was often referred to as, mutually assured destruction (MAD) weapons.

At about the same time, there was another race taking place—the space race, which grew out of this same militarization movement. This race was more of a competition between the Soviet Union and the U.S. to see which could be the first to explore outer space, build satellites, send humans into space, and land astronauts on the Moon. Luckily, both of these “races” have subsided over time and the two countries are more often partners rather than competitors on a host of international issues.

However, a new race has developed in our own housekeeping backyard; it started gradually and is now sweeping through the hotel and hospitality industry. Many call it “the amenities arms race” and some refer to it as “the battle of the beds.”

Regardless of how it is referenced, this race refers to the same phenomenon: Hotels are refurbishing their guestrooms—whether tourist class, luxury, or royal—and getting plusher with more and more amenities to exceed customer expectations as well as to top their competition.

Although hotel guests may appreciate these luxuries, in many cases, they are causing nothing but pain—literally—for hotel housekeepers. In fact, the study “Creating Luxury, Enduring Pain,” released in April 2006, found that hotel housekeepers now have the highest injury rate of all lodging workers in the United States.

Survey Findings

The study focused on the injuries of more than 40,000 hotel workers in 87 U.S. hotels from 1999 to 2005. According to the study, housekeepers have a 10.4 percent injury rate—85 percent higher than non-housekeeping hotel workers.

Even more, the study reports that the housekeeper injury rate climbed noticeably starting around 2002; this was when many believe the “amenities race” began. Hotels, working hard to bring back customers after 9/11, started adding more luxuries to entice people back into traveling.

Apparently, new beds being installed as part of the amenities race are major culprits causing these injuries. Orr Consulting, a Virginia-based firm dealing in ergonomics, found that new hotel mattresses are getting larger—many now weighing more 115 pounds—much more than they weighed a decade ago.

Additionally, beds now often have five or more pillows and the duvets (bed covers) are getting larger, plusher, and considerably heavier as well—often weighing more than 14 pounds. And, some hotels now use three sheets instead of two because they believe it makes the bed feel more sumptuous.

“But, all of this means more work—and heavier work—for hotel housekeepers,” says Martha Ward, head of corporate accounts for Tornado Industries, manufacturers of professional vacuum cleaners, floor machines, extractors, and other cleaning equipment used in the hotel industry. “Some housekeepers say the luxuries add as much as 15 minutes more work to each guestroom and yet they are still required to clean the usual 12 to 16 rooms per day. And along with making heavier more luxury-strewn beds, they must still clean and re-stock bathrooms, dust furniture, wash mirrors, and of course, vacuum.”

Industry Responds...and Seeks Remedies

Just as the studies indicate, more and more public health administrators are noticing the upswing in housekeeper injuries in the past few years. One physician, Peter Orris, who is also a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says that hotel housekeepers were once considered “invisible workers” because they rarely reported job-related injuries.

“[But now we see housekeeping] as among the highest stress jobs (on the body) in the service and production industries,” Orris says. “This is a real problem and it looks like it’s getting worse.”

However, the American Hotel & Lodging Association believes some of these reports and studies may be exaggerated. Still, the association indicates many of its member hotels are hiring ergonomic experts, implementing training programs, investing in automated room carts, and re-examining the tools and